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ABSTRACT

This paper details an analysis of prospective early childhood teachers' responses on a university application to the question "Why are you interested in becoming a teacher?" The paper identifies potential sources of strength and vulnerability in students' written responses and offers tentative interpretations that critique prospective early childhood teachers' understandings of the complexity and intensity of teachers' work. The paper also speculates on the impact their perspectives may have on their approaches to teacher preparation experiences and teaching, and offers implications for teacher educators framed around building on strengths and reducing vulnerabilities. Major themes identified in prospective teachers' responses were: (1) having influential experiences; (2) fulfilling a dream; (3) loving children; (4) seeing children learn; (5) enjoying challenges and responsibilities; (6) teaching to learn; (7) making a difference; and (8) overcoming deficits in children's lives. The paper asserts that while the deep commitment to making a difference in the lives of young children and society in general is a major strength of prospective teachers' motivations, it can also be a weakness if it leaves students open to disappointment, disillusionment, and potential disengagement. Contains 11 references. (EV)

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# Why Teach?

## Prospective Teachers' Reasons for Entering the Profession

ED 433 125

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**Abstract**

This paper reports the results of our analysis of responses to the question, "Why are you interested in becoming a teacher?" The paper reports themes found in the student answers and identifies potential sources of strength and vulnerability revealed in students' written responses. We explore what beliefs about themselves as teachers might mean as they continue their education and become classroom teachers. Implications for teacher educators are offered for building on strengths and reducing the vulnerabilities of their students.

# Why Teach?

## Prospective Teachers Reasons for Entering the Profession

## Introduction

"Why are you interested in becoming a teacher?" Every semester, we interview thirty to forty university students competing for fifteen or so places in our early childhood teacher preparation program. As part of the admissions process, we have prospective teachers complete an application that begins with the "Why are you interested...?" question. As we have read applications and participated in interviews, we have been fascinated with what appear to be patterns in students' explanations. We decided it might be interesting and instructive to go back into our applications and do a content analysis of students' written responses to this question.

This paper reports the results of our analysis and identifies potential sources of strength and vulnerability revealed in students' written responses. We offer tentative interpretations that critique prospective early childhood teachers' understandings of the complexity and intensity of teachers' work; we speculate on the impact their perspectives may have on their approaches to teacher preparation experiences and teaching; and we offer implications for teacher educators framed around building on strengths and reducing vulnerabilities.

### Program Context

The department of theory and practice in teacher education at the University of Tennessee is comprised of options that allow prospective students a choice in teacher

preparation programs. This study focused on the Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) program, a program blending early childhood and early childhood special education that prepares future teachers to work in inclusive settings. All students in the college participate in a five-year course of study, and each student earns an undergraduate degree from the college of arts and science. In the fifth year, the internship year, the students work for one complete school year as a novice teacher under the guidance of a mentoring teacher. With the completion of the internship, coursework integrated into classroom experiences, and 12 additional graduate hours, the student receives a master's degree and begins teacher employment with one year of experience.

Our analysis examined the admission forms filled out by 64 students who were ultimately admitted to the IECE program and actively participated in the pre-service classes and internship year. As part of the admission process, each student completed an application and was interviewed by an admission board comprised of faculty members, practitioners, and students. Acceptance into the IECE program is, in part, based on the students' ability to articulate why they want to teach.

For this project, we looked at 64 application forms spanning four academic years. Of the 64, one applicant was male, and three of the 63 females were African American. The data set consisted of responses to the first question on the application form, which asks, "Why are you interested in becoming a teacher?"

The application forms were divided between us. We read the responses and categorized them independently. We then compared our data, finding commonalties and discovering new categories in one or the other analysis. As we continued to explore what the categories represented to the applicants, it became clear that there were several themes running across the 64 application forms. The following section looks at eight themes and provides evidence to support the inclusion of each. Following the presentation of themes, we present a discussion and implications for pre-service programs.

## Themes

Having Influential Experiences

Several students indicated that they are interested in teaching because, in the past, they have had positive experiences in teaching roles. Some worked with young children as volunteers in church or high school programs, some have been employed at daycare and preschool facilities, some have worked as substitute teachers, and two mentioned that their experiences as mothers, their children's "first teachers," convinced them that early childhood teaching was for them. All students who cited direct experience as a positive factor went on to explain the experiences and why those experiences led to a decision to teach.

In addition to positive experiences with children, contacts with parents and family members was another strong theme in students' explanations for why they became interested in teaching. They discussed the influence of parents and other family members who had been or are now teaching, and how family connections naturally lead to the consideration of teaching as an option. One student wrote, "The instruction of children has been a popular career choice of my family"; another noted that "Several of my family members are teachers. Through my conversations with them, I have gained a definite appreciation for the challenges and rewards of a career in teaching." Parents, grandparents, siblings, and in-laws were mentioned as family influences on the decision to teach.

Many noted the effects of certain teachers on their decision to become a teacher. Some cited positive experiences with teachers as a motivator to teach, while others decided to teach because they wanted to provide children with better learning

opportunities than they had at the hands of teachers they perceive to be incompetent, inept, or even cruel. Several students said they wanted to "give back to children what my teachers gave to me." Some mentioned particular teachers whom they admired and wanted to emulate. For example, one wrote:

> My fondest memory of school is from my fifth grade class with Mr. Smith. He is one of the first people that started my interest in school and learning. He put a tremendous amount of effort into his students because he truly cared about them. He touched my life in a special way, and I want to be able to do the same for each student I have in my class.

Students identifying bad teachers as an influence were roughly equal in number to those citing good teachers. One detailed her bad experiences:

> Personally, I had several teachers during elementary school that failed to make my school years a positive experience. For long time periods, I would dread going to school and make any excuse not to go. I look back now and see how sad this was for me to have such a negative attitude about school. I hope to use my experiences to make sure no child will go through what I did in school.

Both good and bad experiences with teachers were an important factor for many students considering teaching as a potential career.

Fulfilling a Dream

Many of the individuals whose comments we analyzed claimed to have known very early in their lives that teaching was for them. Several traced their interest in teaching to their earliest memories. They used phrases like "for as long as I can remember," "ever since I was a little girl," and "even as a child" to express their long-term commitment to becoming teachers. Some characterized their desire as a dream, for example, "I am interested in becoming a teacher because teaching is something that I have dreamed of making a career of since childhood." Others recounted evidence of their long-term connection to teaching by revealing that they have been "teachers" since

childhood. One woman wrote: "When I was a little girl, I loved to set my dolls around and pretend they were my students. Sometimes my little sister would become my pupil." Others wrote of constantly playing school and taking the role of teacher with younger siblings and neighborhood children, offering this as evidence that they were, in one student's words, "called to teach."

Loving Children

Twenty-four student responses expressed a love for children and cited the enjoyment of working with them as a reason for an interest in teaching. Most used the phrase, "I love children," directly in their answers, and many wrote of the joy and satisfaction they received from working with children. Among the phrases that followed "I love children" were: "and I love working with them"; "and I enjoy being with them"; "and I thrive on the energy of young children"; "and I love to see them succeed"; "and I love their curiosity"; "and I have always loved interacting with them as well as helping them learn; "and I feel compelled to work with them"; "and I do not see another job which can offer the joy you can receive working with children."

Several offered that their "I love children" response was "obvious" or "trite," but they reasoned that their feelings were real and directly connected to becoming an effective teacher. One wrote that her feelings about children represented "genuine love, something I think every teacher should have." Another concluded: "My most important reason for becoming a teacher seems cliché, yet undeniable. I have an innate love and concern for children." A clear pattern exists in the data indicating that students are drawn to early childhood education because they have strong feelings of affection for children and enjoy being around and working with them.

Seeing Children Learn

As noted above, the students expressed enjoyment in being a part of the learning process and of being around children. The enjoyment is directly tied to having real feelings of affection for young children. In addition to the expressed love for children, the students expressed strong feelings related to "seeing students' eyes light up when they have figured out a problem or learned a new concept." The students are cognizant of their role as teacher in facilitating the learning process. They describe seeing children learn as "exhilarating" and "the greatest feeling in the world." They make a direct connection between their role as teacher and the act of learning in the children. One student summed it up in this way:

> In working with children I have witnessed many of them progress academically and emotionally. When I realized my role in this progression, I knew I was called to be a teacher. I have never experienced such a sense of satisfaction as I have received while being involved in the learning process of a child.

The love of children extends beyond just loving the young children. The students experience great pleasure and personal satisfaction when children learn as a direct result of their actions as teachers.

Enjoying Challenges and Responsibilities

It is interesting to note that multiple applicants mention the hard work of teaching and the associated difficulties of being a classroom teacher. Teaching is seen as a challenging career because children in the classroom present with a variety of "diverse backgrounds and personalities," schools are beleaguered with "limited resources," and changes in society such as "technological advances" place great demands on the classroom teacher. According to the words of the applicants, it is these very challenges

that intrigue them and offer a career seen as a "most challenging and rewarding profession."

However, only one student noted that external rewards are not easily accessible for teachers. She is a mother and non-traditional student seeking licensure after having children and a career in the business world. She appears to have a realistic view of the inherent challenges confronting classroom teachers: "We need and must demand highly motivated and dedicated individuals who are willing to work very hard, in a diverse environment, with limited resources and very few pats on the back." Teaching is viewed as hard work that requires motivated and enthusiastic teachers. But according to the students, the rewards outweigh the difficulties of classroom teaching.

Teaching to Learn

A strong category that emerged is the notion that life-long learning is a desirable quality, not only for students, but also for teachers. In working with students, such comments as "I feel compelled to…teach them the importance of education" and "For me, there is no greater reward than sparking a child's imagination and making him want to learn" demonstrated that students feel strongly the importance of not only teaching children, but teaching *the desire to learn* as well.

In addition to instilling a love of learning in children, the prospective teachers see teaching as a way to continue their own journey of learning throughout life. One of the applicants specifically refers to the process of life-long learning in her application: "Teaching will allow me to interact with young learners in an enriching environment where I can remain a lifelong learner as I search for ways to assist and guide my

students." Several other applicants refer to the process, indicating that the concept is clearly present and holds value for many of our future teachers.

Making a Difference

Many students saw teaching as a way to touch the future, to make a difference in the lives of children, and to shape society. Their answers indicated a commitment to doing work that is meaningful in the sense that it influences the life chances of children and provides the opportunity to improve society in the future.

Students expressed a desire to make a difference in children's lives and saw teaching as a way to do that. Many framed their comments around the idea of "making a mark" or "making an impression" in one child's life. For example, one wrote:

> Teaching will give me the opportunity to enhance the future of a young child. I want to be the person that shapes and develops a young mind and leads a child towards a bright future. Education is the one gift I can give this child. I want to be an influential person in a child's life.

Others wrote of providing experiences, knowledge, and skills that they saw as helping improve the future lives of children. They used phrases like "getting a child's education off to a great start" and "providing skills to survive in this world" as examples of ways they could have a positive impact on children's lives.

One woman's comments articulated others' desire to touch the lives of children and influence society: "If I can make a difference in one child's life, I will have contributed to society." This desire to contribute to society is another theme in the data. For many, the logic was straightforward: children represent the future of our society; contributing to a child's development today improves his or her chances of becoming a productive adult; happy, well-educated adults help ensure the improvement of society; so, in one woman's words, "children's future and the future of the country lie within

education." Another student captured the sentiments of many of her peers when she summarized:

> I feel that the future of our country depends on how we educate our children because they are our best and most important assets. I have always wanted to be a teacher because it is a positive way to contribute to the world's future by strengthening young minds.

Touching the lives of children and influencing the future of society were two strong influences on students' interest in teaching.

Overcoming Deficits

Another theme that many of the applicants mentioned involved the notion that by becoming teachers they can help to overcome what they perceive as deficits in the lives of children. In particular, three dimensions of deficits are mentioned: home and family, schools, and community and society.

Home and family. It is not uncommon to hear pre-service students, interns, and even seasoned teachers denounce the quality of the homelife of their students. The notion that parents are non-supportive of school personnel and are responsible for students' lack of motivation and inappropriate classroom behavior are common themes in students' applications. In the applications, the following statements are indicative of some pre-service teachers' understanding of the role of families in children perceived as problematic in the classroom: "Children from single parent homes is increasing rapidly; because of this, quality time is often neglected and forgotten. The responsibility then becomes part of the teacher's job"; and, "Teachers in the classroom have to pick up where parenting leaves off, and even begin when good parenting is lacking, or not even there." The applicants have the perception that they are not only " qualified but

motivated" and will "have a positive effect" as teachers of young children "who do not receive support from their families."

Schools. We were intrigued by the ideas expressed by students regarding the role of schools in contributing to the education of young children. For some, schools are seen as a vital component in the developmental process of children, while others say schools are detrimental to the learning process. For those who see schools as playing a major role in learning, the role of teacher is to "provide children with a rich environment so they can acquire the skills they need to survive in this society and this world." In addition, the classroom can continue a process of development that begins at home as positively stated by one student: "The home is where (educating our youth) begins; the classroom is the next step."

However, one student perceives the school system as responsible for student difficulties. She commented, "I blame most of the problems of today on two main socialization institutes: the family and the educational system." Other students expressed similar sentiments regarding the negative role of schools and how as teachers in the classroom, they have a strong desire to be a part of the system that can have a positive impact on young children.

Society. Still other applicants refer to what they perceive as societal problems that impact students in the classroom. One student made this statement:

> So many kids today are growing up understanding so little about what life really is. For example, being exposed to drugs and alcohol and experiencing sex too soon. If I can stop some of these things from happening in just a few lives, it's worth it.

One student even refers to children as an "oppressed group" who are "unable to effectively mass together any measurable forces of wealth, power, and prestige, and

lobby for their own interest and well-being." This young woman sees herself as being an advocate for her students who are too young to effectively speak or act on their own behalf. Not only is her role to teach, but she also sees her role as one of defender of the rights of young children until such time that the children can become capable decision makers on their own.

In the role of teacher, students see themselves as impacting the lives of children by providing opportunities for learning that will, in turn, enable children to overcome the deficits in their own lives as opposed to succumbing to pressures from without.

## Discussion

### Limitations

This is not a report of research. We realize that several factors limit the scope of this project. Our data are limited because only one response among six on the application was analyzed, only responses of individuals who were accepted into the unit were examined, and only those students for whom we had complete applications in our files were included. In addition, ours is a special program that may attract applications from a particular kind of prospective teacher, and the students in our program (and virtually all of the teacher preparation programs in our college) are individuals who are mostly young, white, female, and from the state of Tennessee. While it is true that the majority of early childhood teacher education students in universities like ours may fit the young, white, female mold, we recognize that our findings are limited by the lack of diversity represented in our data.

More troublesome for us is the recognition that our analysis separates their written words from our students as individuals and from the contexts in which they were written. We are lucky enough to know the people who wrote these answers. We have worked closely with most of them for 18 months or more, so we realize that distilling their

feelings about teaching into this analysis does not really represent them or their complex understandings related to teaching. We also recognize that the students wrote these responses for the purpose of making favorable impressions so that they would be admitted into our program. In some ways, this informal analysis may be as much about what our students thought the IECE faculty wanted to hear as what the students believed.

Within these limitations, we see value in the analysis for revealing patterns of response across this group that may help others see the development of prospective teachers more clearly. Our experiences with these students and with others like them, from the interview stage to professional licensure, tell us that the patterns are not far wrong in reflecting very real explanations for why students select teaching as a career.

In the sections to follow, we will discuss the patterns described in terms of sources of strength and signs of vulnerability. As we tried to interpret our analyses, we asked ourselves this question: "In so far as these comments reflect perspectives on and attitudes about teaching, what are the implications for students like these as they enter the profession?" It is our belief that most of the themes offer evidence both of strength that will help individuals develop into successful teachers and of vulnerability that may jeopardize their chances for success.

Sources of Strength

A major strength we see across the themes is the deep commitment to making a difference in the lives of young children and society in general. It is a powerful experience when students talk or write about being "called to teach," share their feelings of affection for children, or express their joy at seeing young people learn. When these students confide that it's their dream to become a teacher, they reveal a kind of commitment that few other professions are able to muster in their prospective members. While it's easy to dismiss such commitment as idealistic or naive, we see the power in such strong feelings to motivate students to work hard, to be the best teachers they can be, and to stay the course when obstacles block their paths (see Ayers, 1989).

We see it as a strength that many of the students selected teaching based on direct experience working with children or on contacts with experienced teachers. This gives us confidence that these students have at least a partial notion of what teaching entails, how difficult it can be, and how scarce the rewards for good teaching turn out to be. Of course, we have no way to measure the impact of these experiences, direct or vicarious, but we can say that students choosing teaching based on direct or indirect experience have some kind of knowledge base on which to ground their decision to teach.

Some prospective students signal in their responses that they know teaching is difficult, challenging work. A few have well-developed knowledge of the complex and difficult roles of the teacher and still want to do the work. It is a strength to see challenges as opportunities, and this seems to be the perspective of many of our students. They know at some level that the work is hard, but they accept the challenge as an opportunity to do important, meaningful work.

An additional pattern of strength is the theme of lifelong learning. Since learning is the business of teachers, how fortunate that many students think of themselves as learners and see themselves as guiding the learning of others. It is one of the great ironies of our work that so many in our profession do not see learning as intrinsically valuable and do not see themselves as either learners or models of learners. Individuals who love to learn and love the idea of helping others develop as lifelong learners have a great deal to offer the profession and their young students.

Signs of Vulnerability

We see elements of a yin-yang relationship within many of the strengths mentioned above. Sources of strength are also areas where students may be revealing potential vulnerabilities. Most strikingly, the students' deep commitment to making significant changes in the lives of children and society leaves them open to disappointment, disillusionment, and potential disengagement when faced with the realization that such changes are often overwhelmingly difficult. It is a long way to fall if

you come to the realization that you have not fulfilled your calling or that you have to give up on your dream. Students who bring high levels of commitment increase their risk, at the same time they improve their chances for success.

Relatedly, students who choose teaching in an effort to have positive effects on the lives of children sometimes get caught in conflicts when faced with the reality of enacting the often contradictory roles of teacher. Individuals who see themselves as nurturers may have difficulty acting as the disciplinarian or evaluator in the classroom. New teachers who see themselves as facilitators of each child's development may be overcome with the reality of moving 25-30 children through a prescribed curriculum that is evaluated via standardized tests. Teaching is full of dilemmas and paradoxes (Halliwell, 1995; Hatch, 1999), and students are vulnerable when their expectations for teaching fail to take its complex and contradictory nature into account.

Teaching is a job with few extrinsic rewards (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Looking at patterns in students' responses, it is clear that they are coming to teaching with the expectation that intrinsic rewards will be forthcoming and that the intrinsic rewards will sustain them, even when teaching is difficult. They may be vulnerable on both counts. Teachers who look to their relationships with students for intrinsic satisfaction run substantial risks when they become dependent on positive reactions from those they are supposed to supervise and direct. Woods (1987) points out that the system demands that the teacher be in charge of the students' learning and behavior, and an "overindulgence in friendship" can lead to difficulties when the situation demands "teacherly" behavior (p. 123). Depending on students to return the love new teachers bring to their role, places them in a difficult position that prospective teachers have a hard time anticipating.

Students looking ahead seem to accept that teaching offers little money, low status, and few opportunities for advancement, but research indicates that many new teachers experience "white-collar blues" when they realize they are being treated more like blue collar workers than their counterparts in other occupations requiring similar

training (Ashton & Webb, 1986, p. 40). The absence of extrinsic rewards makes students who enter teaching with the expectation that intrinsic rewards will be sufficient even more vulnerable to disappointment.

Another, more subtle, vulnerability is related to the possibility that students' responses may contribute to the ongoing perception in society that teaching is "women's work" (Apple, 1988; Hatch, 1999). Student answers that indicate a love for children and an innate attraction to working with children may serve to perpetuate beliefs that maintain teaching as a low status occupation and schools as places where workers need close supervision (see Gitlin & Margonis, 1995; Weiler, 1994). A powerful case can be made for recognizing the importance of caring in school and acknowledging the special strengths that women bring to teaching (see Noddings, 1992). Unfortunately, such declarations influence perceptions that help keep education and teaching near the bottom of our society's professional status hierarchy and economic agenda.

One troublesome aspect of our analysis is tied to the theme of overcoming deficits. Our read from studying these responses and working with the students who wrote them is that many come into the program with a heavily ethnocentric view of the world. Many have not confronted their own prejudices and biases, and they believe their ways of living, their ways of thinking, their ways of being are inherently superior to the ways of families and cultural groups who are different. We worry that the deficit model they are using as they organize their thoughts about children and families will lead to a "blaming the victim" mentality once they begin teaching and face the difficult conditions associated with of working in schools that serve diverse populations (see Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). We work very hard in our program to confront these issues, and to help students see their view as only one view, but we are concerned with the vulnerability of the teachers (and their students) when they start with the perception that different equals less than normal.

## Implications

It would be presumptive to assume that most students will hold the same values, beliefs, and attitudes evident in our project. However, we feel that the themes are strong and have implications for teacher education programs.

Awareness

We see awareness as playing an important role in bringing issues to the table for discussion. The notion of awareness is twofold and is discussed below along with activities for increasing awareness.

Student awareness. We must enable students to gain insights into how *they* think about teaching, children, families, and society in general. The following activities are suggested as ways to increase student awareness of children in classrooms, the complexity of teachers' roles, and the conflicts that occur when those roles collide:

- Provide extended field experiences that allow students to become immersed in classrooms with children and in the daily routines, problems, and even crises that can and do occur.
- Conduct follow-up seminars based on field experiences that engage students in dialogue. Exploration of classroom experiences can lead to discussions related to controversial topics; personal belief systems; and, ultimately, unrealistic thinking. This may create discomfort if we view such discussions as impinging on valuable class time. However, in our experience, we find that such discussions lead to deeper meaning and understanding of the work of teaching.
- Invite practitioners to lead seminars that encourage dialogue about students' notions of classroom life.
- Bring in noted educators as speakers. We invited William Ayers to visit with our students. Through open dialogue, students were given opportunities to engage in discussion with Ayers about his actual experiences and the realities of classrooms.
- Develop a "wrap." Ayers (personal communication, April, 1997) suggests that students come up with a short description of their work with children. As they think through their work, the wrap becomes a way of communicating their joy, enthusiasm, and professionalism to others.

Teacher educator awareness. It's important that *we, as teacher educators,* are aware of what students bring to the classroom when they think about teaching and children. To increase awareness of the students' thinking, the following activities have been incorporated into our work with preservice teachers:

- Develop seminars that permit educators opportunities to gain insight into students' thinking. It is easy to assume that students understand the depth of concepts, such as diversity, inclusion, life-long learning, multiculturalism, and even the word "teaching." Discrepancies can occur in how educators use terms and how students hear terms. Checking for understanding can facilitate communication.
- Incorporate reflective journal writing, based on classroom and field experiences, into course assignments. Ongoing reading of students' journals allows educators to see conceptual development as students' experiential base increases.

Celebrate commitment

It's easy to negate the students' commitment as being naive or idealistic thinking that has the potential to set students up for future disillusionment or failure. However, we can celebrate students' strong commitment as we work to build skills, attitudes, and communication that will help achieve significant changes. The following are suggested activities:

- Create an environment that seeks to move away from a "helping those people" mentality to a thinking system that enables students to form relationships with children and families that can lead to systemic changes.
- Brainstorm specific activities that can turn students' emotional commitment into action. Such activities may include community involvement and extra curriculum activities within the school setting.

Teacher attribution and burnout have been documented as contributing substantially to the loss of capable young teachers (Gold, 1996). By including activities in preservice programs that involve students in early teaching experiences, inititate them into the complexity of teachers' work, and provide support for their initial commitment and enthusiasm, we may insulate them from the disillusionment and disengagement that can lead to attrition and burnout.

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